Wisdom, Form and Genre

Most of us do not comprehend a phrase by running through all the possible meanings of each component word, any more than we would read through a text by sounding out each letter: even at a very basic level, communication consists of more than the sum of its parts, and relies on the recognition of broader shapes and contexts. Above all, though, it depends on an experience of previous communication that is shared by the parties involved, at least in some general sense, and that shapes their interaction.So, for example, the conventional presentation of English verse in lines and stanzas shapes the expectation of readers as soon as they encounter it, just as the way verse is read aloud alerts listeners to its nature. There are different expectations, furthermore, attached to particular poetic forms and metres, just as there may be different formal conventions in prose: we should not generally, for example, expect to find footnotes in a modern comic novel, or to encounter a short story typeset in columns like a newspaper article. It is not just the cover of a book that tells us what we are about to read, and our previous experience of literature may help us to pick up numerous signals about the content before we have read a single word. Once we begin to read, the style, subject-matter and choice of vocabulary will all help to consolidate our understanding of what type of text we have before us, but it is important to appreciate both that this remains, in important ways, a process of negotiation, and that texts do not simply fall into single, monolithic categories, each directly comparable with the next. Indeed, even the most obvious conventions of prose and verse can yield in forms like the prose poem or poetic prose, where the reader is guided more by modes of expression and choice of words than by rhythm or presentation. While it is not difficult to recognize the significance of constraints and conventions that we can describe as generic, it is much harder to talk about "genres" *tout simple*.

One important reason is that texts quite commonly involve the use of more than one set of generic conventions. The fact that Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, for example, takes the form of fictional letters does not prevent it from being a novel, and there are other novels which use emails, journal entries, police statements, or all sorts of other materials to construct or to further their narrative. When we read such component parts, we expect each to obey the constraints of its own genre, while the work as a whole follows different constraints. This is not a matter of simple compatibility, because the process is not necessarily reversible — a novel might include a police statement, but a police statement could not include a novel — and it is not something that is confined to novels: a play may contain songs, for example, or a poem cite an aphorism or a different sort of poem (as when Wifred Owen's "Dulce et decorum est" cites Horace). So long as the expectations associated with one type of material can be read in terms of those associated with another, it is possible for genres to subsume each other, and, talking about this phenomenon in novels, Bakhtin (1986, 62) speaks of "primary (simple) genres", which are "altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones. They lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real

utterances of others" and they "enter into actual reality only via the novel as a whole." That distinction may require some qualification — not all genres are easily separable into "simple" or "complex" — but it highlights a common and important way in which genres can be combined. It is also possible for genres to be combined or extended in different ways, effectively forming new genres: E.D. Hirsch (1967, 106–9) cites the example of Byron's *Don Juan* as an extension of the epic genre, which incorporates elements unknown in epic, while we might view the various sorts of modern crime fiction as extensions of the novel, which add their own conventions and constraints, or recognize the quite different sets of conventions brought together in, say, the science-fiction thriller or the historical romance.

We cannot usefully insist that such works must correspond in their totality to any single set of generic conventions, and it is famously difficult to describe the characteristics of specific genres in a way that neither excludes many texts commonly supposed to belong to that genre nor abandons any pretense of precision. Generic classification has to deal, furthermore, with the problem that there are different types of convention and expectation involved in the interaction between text and reader, and it would clearly be unhelpful to insist that all our generic descriptions must relate to some single aspect of texts, be it structural, contextual or thematic, when the ways in which we naturally link or distinguish texts relate to no such single aspect. If they do not, however, then it is correspondingly impossible to insist that genres are mutually exclusive, let alone that any given text must belong to a single genre. A work may in principle, therefore, belong in one genre according to its form, another according to its content, and yet another according to the context in which it is used. The issue is further complicated by the fact that new genres may be constituted by changes not in the texts themselves, but in the criteria applied to them. Black fiction and Victorian women's novels, for example, are categories that would have been unfamiliar to much earlier generations, and although it would be bold to assert that such categories are any more or less artificial than older ones, their emergence tends to highlight the extent to which generic classification has more to do with the questions and assumptions that we take to our study of texts than with the uncovering of archetypes inherent within them.

Of course, genre is not only a matter of classification, but of composition also, and although it is true that works may be assigned to categories which would have been unknown to their authors, it is surely no less true that authors typically rely heavily on genre, and on their readers' recognition of generic convention. Indeed, for certain types of composition, adherence to, or adaptation of convention is a crucial part of their character: by responding to a fixed set of constraints, for instance, the writers of haikus or sonnets exhibit a compositional skill that is supposed to be admired in and of itself, although, at the other end of the literary spectrum, the same game may be played in the composition of limericks or of certain types of joke. Such strict uses of convention, however, are the exception rather than the rule, and although, of course, poetry may be constrained by conventions of prosody in many traditions, relatively few compositions are governed more generally by some

detailed set of rules. Indeed, it is an important insight of modern genre theory that texts are shaped by other texts, not by fixed and immovable abstractions, and that their commonalities are more like family resemblances than the consequence of being modelled on a single archetype. This implies, of course, that we cannot straightforwardly isolate the constituents of a genre by some process of abstraction, and even in the case of sonnets or haikus, such analysis results very swiftly either in a multiplication of sub-genres or in the isolation of common features so general as to be almost without consequence: neither of those forms, it transpires, has followed any single set of rules throughout its history, and both have evolved in various ways. In short, the idea of generic convention and communication remains important (and much debated) in the modern study of literature, but most scholars have turned away from an emphasis on genres themselves as anything more than a heuristic tool: there is little appetite these days for the sort of grand generic taxonomies which dominated earlier poetics, or even for the historical study of genres. Indeed, it would probably be true to say that many writers now treat genre as something that is inherent not in texts but in the study of texts.

It would be difficult to say how far the study of the Hebrew Bible has been influenced by such developments, not least because the direct treatment of genre has been, and remains, surprisingly unusual in a discipline that is centred upon a corpus of literature. Since the beginning of the last century, biblical scholars have often instead treated generic issues as an aspect of form-critical study, to the extent, indeed, that many seem either to regard form criticism as a substitute for the study of genre, or at least to accept the use of concepts and vocabulary from form criticism where other scholars would speak of genre. There have been explicit attempts in recent times, furthermore, actually to re-package form criticism as a type of literary analysis, occupying much the same ground as genre studies. I have addressed such attempts in a recent article elsewhere (Weeks 2013), and shall not repeat myself here, but it is important to recognize the confusions that are involved in, and that arise from taking a technique which was designed for recreating socio-historical situations *via* their influence on oral traditions, and trying to use it as a way to characterize the connections between literary texts.

In its basic assumptions, form criticism is not wholly unrelated, in fact, either to those modern studies of genre that focus on socio-cultural aspects, or to classic Aristotelian perceptions of genre in terms of universals that can be inferred from exemplars: it seeks to abstract a basic underlying form, shaped by the requirements or perceptions of a particular context, from the texts that constitute a *Gattung*. This is like grasping the nature of a Lego® brick by looking at a box full of Lego®: we can comprehend the underlying characteristics of the brick even though the bricks that we actually see may have different shapes, sizes and colours — in fact, it is the degree of variation between the different bricks that enables us to judge what is and what is not essential, and prevents us from assuming that, for instance, "redness" is intrinsic to the nature of a Lego® brick. That does not mean, of course, that its colour is somehow a secondary characteristic of any particular brick, but it does mean that we can

disregard colour, along with size or many other features, when trying to assess the function of "the Lego® brick", or to discern the circumstances that might have given influenced its creation and development. In terms of those texts with presumed oral-traditional origins with which form criticism is concerned, this means that we may be looking for different types of connection between the texts, and forms, like genres, are not necessarily to be characterized in terms of the detailed structural similarities often posited in form-critical studies. It is not really surprising that discussions of form have tended to displace studies of genre in biblical studies, because the form-critical form closely resembles the classic, deductive genre that dominated older literary-critical studies (so, similarly, Mitchell 2007, 32). It is difficult, however, to disentangle the form itself from the various other paraphernalia of form criticism, or from the basic form-critical assumption that texts have been built upon forms – and, indeed, to do so would be simply to change the meaning of "form". Consequently, biblical scholars tend to import form-critical assumptions into discussions of genre, even when they are not seeking explicitly to undertake form-critical examinations.

This tendency is evident in two well-known, if now rather elderly, British works on Proverbs: Norman Whybray's monograph *Wisdom in Proverbs: the Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9*, first published in 1965, and William McKane's 1970 commentary, *Proverbs: a New Approach*. Whybray's study does not declare its methodological underpinnings, although he speaks of Proverbs 1-9 containing "a series of relatively lengthy sections in each of which there is a sustained continuity of thought", and states his intention to examine these "along two well-tried lines of Old Testament literary criticism: the study of the relation of each section to the others, and the examination of the internal structure of each section" (Whybray 1965, 31). What he does in practice is to identify ten discourses, and then to distinguish original from secondary material in each: no overall rationale is outlined, and Whybray frequently treats the secondary character of his "additions" as self-evident, but a retrospective justification is offered by a comparison with Egyptian instructions, which asserts "the credibility of the Book of the Discourses as an example of a known literary form" (Whybray 1965, 71). Although very different in some respects, McKane's commentary is also reluctant to discuss its methodological assumptions, although McKane does begin by rejecting a form-critical belief, widely held at the time, according to which the more sophisticated units typical of instruction literature evolved from the simpler sayings found in sayings collections. This rejection rests on a wide-ranging survey of ancient didactic literature, which enables him to identify and define two distinct types of material, sentence literature and the instruction, with their own separate histories, and this in turn leads McKane to group materials in Proverbs according to their membership of each type. In the body of the commentary, indeed, this grouping leads him to treat them out of order – a procedure that accentuates the differences, even if does make the commentary very difficult to use – and also to exclude as secondary any sentence literature that has found its way into instructional material, as is often the case, for example, in Proverbs 3.

Neither of these works, then, declares itself to be form-critical, and McKane, at least, would probably reject that label outright; both of them, moreover, treat Proverbs as literary in nature and origin, rather than as oral-traditional, and each of them rests their case on the belief that Proverbs 1-9, at least, is modelled on a literary genre that has been borrowed from elsewhere. That belief is very probably correct, and I have argued myself elsewhere that the instruction was probably recognized widely in the ancient Near East as a particular type of composition (Weeks 2007, 4-32). What seems to have made instructions recognizable, however, and so what we might describe as the feature which characterizes the genre, is their self-presentation as advice that is being passed down from one generation to the next: in almost all other respects, extant instructions are highly variable. When Whybray and McKane both try to impose more rigid structural (and in McKane's case, syntactical) definitions, which require them to discount a considerable amount of material, they are arguably still working in a way that is not strictly form-critical, although the influence of form-critical analysis is clearly perceptible. When they then use their definitions to reject the discounted material as secondary, however, they are not just arguing in circles, but also revealing a very particular understanding of the instruction genre not merely as prescriptive, but as in some sense definitional: an ancient writer would not, or even could not have composed an instruction that was the wrong shape or that included materials belonging to a different genre. This procrustean understanding of the instruction turns it from a set of literary conventions into something more essential – a form, shaped by specific needs and context.

For other writers, *Sitz im Leben* becomes the principal import from form criticism, and although it is unusual to read claims that their self-presentation must actually imply a domestic origin for instructions (as, e.g., Camp 1997, 91), a presumed educational setting lies behind a quite common assertion that "father" and "son" must be cyphers in the text for "teacher" and "pupil" (e.g. Murphy 1981, 55). The presentation is in fact, of course, a fictional evocation, which requires us neither to locate instructions in the home, nor to suppose that the language of parenthood must have been taken over in some other real-life context: instructions draw on the reality that parents teach and advise their children, but that does not mean any of the literary instructions in our possession was actually written by a parent for their child, or that ancient parents, for that matter, typically offered advice in the long, poetic forms characteristic of most instructions. The form-critical demand for a context is also manifest in treatments of some other texts – as, for instance, when Leo Perdue (Perdue 2008, 158) deals with the mixed generic signals of wisdom psalms by declaring that "Most were likely written to be sung in the liturgical settings of Israelite and Jewish worship (temple and schools)", and goes on (Perdue 2008, 160–4) to speak of the Psalter having been redacted by temple scribes, educated in a wisdom school.

To some extent, perhaps, this is merely a manifestation of the historicism that characterizes biblical studies more generally, and it would be wrong to lay the blame squarely at the door of form-criticism,

but such attitudes can have the effect of squeezing out more interesting or important ways of understanding what is going on. Whilst the use of genre to evoke context must not be mistaken for a genuine historical connection to that context, that is not the same as saying that the original settings of particular genres must be unimportant, and I have already touched on this in the discussion of primary and secondary genres above. When a novelist, say, incorporates a police report or witness statement into their narrative, that novelist relies on the reader to recognize the implicit forensic context, just as ancient readers would surely have recognized, say, the prophetic use of language from legal disputes. Something similar is going on both when instructions evoke the context of parenthood, and, indeed, when other writers borrow conventions from instructions to set the tone or establish the authority of their own compositions. It becomes difficult to appreciate such use of genre, however, if we approach genres through forms, with all their baggage, and if every *Sitz* has to be a *Sitz im Leben*.

The recognition of secondary genres and their implications has, in fact, been one of the most productive areas in the recent study of wisdom literature, although it takes a number of different forms. To take just a few examples, Katharine Dell's assessment of a link between parody and protest in Job (Dell 1991) does not, of course, constitute a straightforward recognition of genre, and her understanding of the book's actual genre as parody raises some significant questions. It does, however, pick up and broaden a longstanding recognition that Job evokes other texts and genres, and puts this recognition to use in interpretation of the book, while some of the more theoretical issues which it raises have been addressed and put on a firmer footing by her student Will Kynes (2011). Job has also been approached from a rather different direction by F. Rachel Magdalene (2007), who sees in its legal language not a mere evocation of the courts, but a progressive presentation of a trial. Elsewhere, Michael Fox has looked to the aretalogies of Isis to throw light on wisdom's self-presentation in Proverbs 1-9 (Fox 2000, 336–8), and Tremper Longman (1991, 1998) to fictional Akkadian autobiographies to throw light on Qohelet's account of himself in Ecclesiastes. All these, and many other studies, suggest in effect that the wisdom books make significant use of other genres to communicate aspects of their meaning through their readers' recognition of those genre.

This sort of work is important, and it potentially does much to enhance our understanding of the texts. Inevitably, though, it brings its own problems, some of which arise from our sheer ignorance – of whether, for instance, readers of Proverbs might ever actually have encountered aretalogies, or readers of Job known the intricacies of neo-Assyrian trial procedures. There are some broader questions of method and genre involved, however, perhaps the most important of which concern the very issue of establishing and delimiting genres: this issue is not unique to biblical scholarship, and is fundamental, indeed, to much of the modern debate about genre, but it is not always recognized to be a problem. In this respect, Longman's connection of Ecclesiastes to ancient biographies offers a particularly interesting example, not least because Longman himself is unusual amongst biblical scholars for his considerable knowledge and awareness of the issues, and devoted much of the first chapter in his

book on the autobigraphies themselves to an outline of issues in contemporary genre theory, along with a justification of his own ideas about the nature of genre, and about the criteria to be applied for establishing the existence of a genre and the identity of its members (Longman 1991, 3–21). His later commentary on Ecclesiastes also included an exemplary treatment of that work's genre, which takes seriously both the fluidity of genre as a concept, and the need to avoid investigating genre solely as a classification for Ecclesiastes as a whole (Longman 1998, 15–22). Despite all this, it is not really clear what we are to make of the particular resemblances that Longman sees between Akkadian autobiographies and the structure of Ecclesiastes.

To summarize Longman's ideas very briefly, he takes a corpus of fifteen Akkadian texts with certain common features, and describes them as "fictional autobiography", a genre which he further sub-divides on the basis of the concluding section in each text. All of the compositions are pseudonymous, and each probably began originally with a first-person self-presentation, which is not always extant, following this with a narrative account of accomplishments; the texts conclude variously, though, with blessings and curses, quasi-apocalyptic material, or didactic admonitions. The sub-genre that ends with instruction is compared with Ecclesiastes, which has a first-person introduction (1:12), a first-person narrative (1:13-6:9), and instruction in the rest of the book (although Longman does recognize that there is some advice in the narrative section, citing 4:12 and 5:2 as examples). No extravagant claims are made on the basis of the comparison, but Longman does claim that formal similarities between Ecclesiastes and the Cuthaean Legend, in particular, "demonstrate a generic relationship between the two" (Longman 1991, 122), and the treatment in his commentary correspondingly suggests that he understands Ecclesiastes to be modelled, structurally at least, on the generic conventions of a sub-genre among Akkadian fictional autobiographies.

Although I find them compelling, I shall not rehearse here the various objections that have been raised against both Longman's identification of the "fictional autobiography" genre and his assessment of the structure in Ecclesiastes (they are summarized succinctly in Koh 2006, 106–12).[1] The real question to my mind, is what possible significance Longman's observations could have even if their accuracy was beyond reproach. The structure that he defines is so broad, and apparently so capable of variation, that it is difficult to say what exactly would have distinguished members of the genre in the eyes of ancient readers – let alone to exclude coincidental correspondence with it. If readers were able to recognize the genre by its features, moreover, it is not clear that recognition would serve to convey anything except the fictionality of the account, which they would presumably have had to grasp already because it is a key distinguishing feature. As for linking Ecclesiastes to the genre, we may reasonably ask how probable it is that either the author or the readers of that book would have been

[1] The issues involved in classifying the Akkadian texts are surveyed in Westenholz 1997, 16–24, which describes Longman's genre as created "through a process of arbitrary selection" (19)

conscious enough of an Akkadian genre which is attested principally in texts that were written several hundred years before the dates normally considered probable for Ecclesiastes. If we are trying to determine the features and reception of inherent genres, consciously employed by writers and not simply imposed on texts by us as a form of classification, then it is surely necessary to demonstrate both that the features of those genres would have distinguished them, and that they could actually have served to shape the original perception of texts.

Despite its strong consciousness of genre as an issue, then, Longman's work does not really seem to engage with the practical problems involved in assigning texts to a genre: the observation of similarities does not suffice to demonstrate conscious and discernable generic affiliations. That is a point that should be emphasized even more strongly, however, with respect to some other, similar claims about Ecclesiastes. A number of scholars have drawn attention in particular to similarities between Qohelet's account of himself and the language of West Semitic royal inscriptions – which are, of course, more likely in principle to have been familiar to readers of Ecclesiastes than the sort of texts invoked by Longman, although the comparison is sometimes extended to include Assyrian inscriptions as well. The claims made on the basis of these similarities are not all expressed in the same way: Seow 1995, for example, says that Qohelet is "imitating the style of royal insciptions" (283), but goes on to talk of his "imitation of the genre" (284) and about "the adaptation of genres" (285); Koh 2006, on the other hand, is careful to state that there is a "difference in genre", and says less specifically that "Qoheleth may have followed the literary traditions of the ancient royal inscriptions when writing his own work (in order to enhance the literary portrayal of his royal persona)" (105). These, along with other discussions of particular similarities (e.g. Fox 1989, 174) all imply, however, that the writer of Ecclesiastes deliberately evoked the language of royal inscriptions in order to establish or affirm his fictional portrayal of Qohelet as a king, in the first two chapters of the book at least.

Despite the plausibility of such claims, it is important to be aware, however, that the whole notion of a style specific to royal autobiographical inscriptions is problematic. Even the Western Semitic texts commonly cited are from a wide range of dates, places, and contexts, and they were written to serve a variety of purposes: once we accept the very concept of royal propaganda, indeed, it should not surprise us to find that there existed texts in which kings proclaim their own names and accomplishments, or even that those texts should have expressed themselves in similar ways: we hardly need to presume that they did so in imitation of each other or of some conventional format, and the elements in common between them barely extend beyond self-introduction and the recounting of deeds. That the forms of expression in these texts must be specifically royal, moreover, is difficult to substantiate. Much is made of a supposed formula "I, so-and-so", followed, not always directly, by a reference to the speaker's kingship before an account of deeds, and this certainly resembles Eccl 1:12. It would be difficult to say, however, that this self-introduction is radically different from others in

Jewish literature, such as the "I, wisdom" of Prov 8:12, or the "I, Tobit" of Tobit 1:3, neither of which is intended to imply royalty, and the same form is used in numerous self-introductions by God (e.g. Isa 43:15). It is perfectly reasonable to say that "I, so-and-so" is a conventional form of self-expression, and we would expect kings to introduce themselves, therefore, by saying "I, so-and-so, king of such-and-such", or to start their account by saying that they became king; however, if we had more inscriptions by butchers, say, we might similarly expect them to start "I, so-and-so, butcher in such-and-such a place", and to speak of formulaic royal self-introductions is no more meaningful than it would be to speak of formulaic butchers' self-introductions (cf. Weeks 2012, 30–2). Readers would surely have recognized that Qohelet was beginning an account of himself in 1:12, but there is no reason to suppose that they would then automatically have associated what followed with any examples of royal propaganda with which they were acquainted, especially when what follows includes so few typically royal accomplishments, and when Qohelet is careful to state that all his actions were on his own behalf, not those of his country (cf. Weeks 2012, 24–9).

Similar problems beset other such analyses. Leo Perdue, for example, makes an interesting set of comparisons between Ecclesiastes and a variety of other ancient text, noting particular affinities with Egyptian tomb autobiographies and with "royal instructions", which he links to Jewish testamentary literature (Perdue 1994, 194–202). That Ecclesiastes bears a resemblance to tomb autobiographies is beyond doubt, but that resemblance arises partly from the autobiographical character of both, as with royal inscriptions, and partly from a long connection between such autobiographies and instructions in Egypt (see Weeks 2007, 5, 11), which means that they often have didactic elements. Perdue does not note, furthermore, that the "darker" religious ideas which he finds in late autobiographies are by no means specific to such inscriptions, and hence a generic feature, but are rather a characteristic of Egyptian religion and literature more generally from the Ramesside period onward (see Assmann 1979). Royal instructions raise a more interesting issue, because instructions attributed to kings, most notably in Egypt the instructions of Amenemhet and for Merikare, do have a particular character, with a strong interest in government and governance which makes them analogous in some ways to the much later *speculum principum* or *Fürstenspiegel*. Whether they constitute a sub-genre that would have been recognized as such in Egypt, let alone Israel, is harder to say, although it is interesting to note that the instruction offered to King Lemuel in Prov 31:1-9 has a similar character.

Like some others before him (most famously Galling 1932, 298, on which see Loretz 1964, 57–65) what Perdue takes from his comparison, however, is not the content, but the idea that Qohelet is "presented as speaking to his audience either in his old age, shortly before death, or perhaps from the tomb" (Perdue 1994, 202; cf. 2007, 190). This may not be inaccurate, given the way in which Qohelet's monologue ends, but it has nothing to do with "royal" instructions in particular, and it is not something that can be determined through some loose association of genre. It is in the nature of all Egyptian instructions to locate themselves at a point of transition between generations, and so around

the time of the speaker's death (which connects them to the tomb autobiographies), but there is virtually nothing in Ecclesiastes that makes it look like an instruction, apart from a belated nod to the genre in the epilogue (12:12 "my son"), and it hardly seems likely that the Qohelet of 2:18-19, who knows nothing of his successor's qualities, is actually supposed to be instructing him. Perdue uses points of comparison with instructions to assert that Ecclesiastes must in some sense be an instruction, despite its lack of that genre's defining characteristic, or at least that it is somehow enough of an instruction and enough of a tomb autobiography to legitimise reading back the setting of each.

The danger in this sort of analysis lies in its capacity to squeeze out other ways of reading the material. The underlying problems, though, lie not only in the sort of definitional looseness exemplified by Perdue's claims, but, more fundamentally, both in a tendency to suppose that the similarities between texts that we can recognize for the purpose of classification must reflect the existence of a genre known to readers, and in a (rather form-critical) inclination to treat genre and generic convention as a matter of identifying particular text-types, understood in essentially structural terms. It is important to observe, in relation to Qohelet's presentation, that many ancient readers would have been familiar with fictional or pseudegraphic memoirs and autobiographies, which are very common amongst ancient compositions. They do not, however, constitute a single type of text, with fixed structures or style, and so although an author might have expected his readers to understand that he was using an accepted literary convention, much as modern novelists would expect their readers to refrain from calling them liars, we cannot really say either that the use of that convention would have required some particular form of expression, or that it would have evoked any additional connotations of context.

This brings me back to the points with which I began this essay. The discourse about genre and convention in biblical studies, influenced so strongly as it is by form criticism, frequently preserves a way of looking at these issues as a matter of whole texts and text-types, and of thinking about genres as exclusive categories to which texts or parts of texts belong. For some purposes, such study is not inappropriate, but it misses the numerous other ways in which genre and convention can link or constrain texts. To take a trivial example, a recent popular guide to modern writing writing notes that:

> In prose, rhyme is pleasing, amusing, or annoying depending on whether it's deliberate, accidental, or appropriate … Accidental rhyme seems careless, the product of a writer with a tin ear. In serious or grave material, rhyming word play in general seems inappropriate and at least undignified, if not repellent. (LaRocque 2013, 163)

Competent writers may go to some lengths in order to avoid rhymes in English prose, even at the cost of precision, because they can either mislead readers into a false understanding of the tone intended, or, more probably, lead them to doubt the competence of the writer in expressing that tone. Indeed, writers will tend to avoid poetic cadence more generally in prose, which has its own rhythms, just as

poets tend to dispense with the many conjunctions and transitional words that feature heavily in much prose. This is a matter of style, but it is also, more fundamentally, a matter of genre, and it illustrates one of the ways in which the shared expectations of reader and writer not only convey information beyond the literal sense of the words used, but also constrain the choice of those words.

We cannot, perhaps, transfer this particular issue to the study of Hebrew literature, but we can pay much more attention to the presentation of texts. McKane's commentary struggled with the undeniable use of imagery in Prov 5:15-20, where he felt that genre should have imposed a constraint:

> … The imperatives in the Instruction are usually associated with a plain, unvarnished mode of communication. Imagery creates more exalted forms of expression; its felicitous use is an important aspect of literary art and it challenges and excites the reader. The Instruction, however, does not aspire to be literature and it sacrifices imaginative outreach to pedestrian clarity. Imagery brings with it problems of interpretation, obscurity and ambiguity, and the concern of the Instruction is above all to be clear and to leave nothing to chance or doubt. (McKane 1970, 317–8)

This is a very strange characterization of instructions, which are generally very literary, poetic works, and it rests largely on McKane's presuppositions about their *Sitz im Leben*, but surely nobody who has read Proverbs 1-9 in the original would anyway suppose its language to be pedestrian: it is packed with figurative speech and with unusual expressions (note, e.g., the prepositions in 8:2-3), many of which are very difficult and were surely never intended "above all to be clear". To appreciate the texture of that language may not be to slap some simple generic label on the work, but it does offer guidance to its nature and purpose without importing generic assumptions, and says much about the way in which it intends itself to be approached. Instead of viewing, say, Qohelet's occasional strings of aphorisms simply as inevitable products of genre, we can similarly ask legitimate questions about their function in a work that is not clearly sentence literature, and perhaps investigate similar uses elsewhere. It is not the big generic classifications that offer most insight, but the more subtle ways in which texts are shaped by genre or exploit convention.

Finally, there is no area, perhaps, in which this is more important than the debates around the very character of wisdom literature, and the nature of the relationships between wisdom and other texts. Traditional ways of treating genre create significant obstacles even to talking about "wisdom literature", since the three biblical books usually classified that way have little in common formally, and the appearance in other literature of interests or conventions usually associated with one or more of the wisdom books has commonly been described in terms of "wisdom influence", implying that such appearances must denote a transfer of wisdom ideas. That is to say, scholarly discussions have tended to bind the formal features of texts to their thought, so that texts with the same ideas or assumptions are expected not to have different forms, while texts with similar forms are presumed to have the same ideas and assumptions. There is no space in this for any classification of wisdom literature that relegates form to a secondary position, or for the idea, conversely, that writers might

allude to wisdom texts without importing or at least engaging with wisdom thought more broadly. In many respects, these assumptions are akin to the sort of illegitimate totality transfer about which James Barr complained in the study of biblical vocabulary, and they make it difficult to say, for instance, that the writer of Psalm 34 might be borrowing expressions and modes of address from Proverbs for reasons other than to convey a broader set of wisdom ideas (cf. Weeks 2013, and contrast, e.g., Botha 2012). There are various factors that have shaped the terms of these discussions, and the problems are not all down to the treatment of genre, but it is a more sophisticated, and less form-critical approach to genre that offers the best way forward, just as it may do much to enrich the way in which we read the wisdom books themselves. We need to move away from labelling or lumping texts together, and toward a better appreciation of the ways in which the biblical writers used convention and allusion to convey tone or nuance.

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